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Who speaks for U.S.?

Who speaks and acts for this country abroad — the State Department or the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)? When information is distributed overseas, is it truthful?

The questions are raised by the disclosure last spring of the CIA's covert propaganda operation abroad and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger's comments last week about that operation. Kissinger was questioned about the issue during his appearance at the annual meeting of the National Conference of Editorial Writers. Here is the exchange:

Question: The Church committee reported that the U.S. has an extensive covert propaganda operation abroad. This involves having hundreds of foreign journalists on the U.S. payroll and the planting of false and misleading information, some of which unavoidably is picked up and published in this country.... Would you tell us why you think such covert propaganda activity is desirable and whether you would consider having it discontinued?

Kissinger: Well, I don't believe that putting misleading information out as news is ever justifiable. The problem arises that in many parts of the world, the media are dominated by or heavily influenced by foreign powers that are hostile to us, and where some attempt is made to get our point of view across. But I would not accept this as saying that it is ever justified to put out misleading information. I would think that any information that is placed through any American governmental organization should be such that it could be published here without misleading the American public.

Question: So you disagree with the practice?

Kissinger: I disagree with the practice of placing misleading information into foreign newspapers.

Question: Do you have the power to order that [stopped]?

Kissinger: I am not sure I have. If it was done in the past I doubt very seriously that it is being done today.

Kissinger's denunciation of the use of phony stories is welcome, but the doubts he expressed that the practice is continuing are vague and not reassuring. A spokesman for the Senate Intelligence Committee noted that a secretary of state cannot publicly acknowledge that his country is planting false stories in another country's newspapers.

The CIA refuses to describe its covert propaganda activities. A spokesman for the agency said that if the agency admitted or denied that it distributed phony stories abroad it would violate the law against disclosing intelligence "sources and methods."

Americans thus are confronted with the spectacle of a secretary of state denouncing a practice bearing on foreign policy that in all probability is being engaged in abroad by another agency of government.

The Church Committee's report on covert propaganda was heavily edited by the CIA, but even so the conclusion is unmistakable from the report that the CIA's tactics include the planting of false and misleading information. The report emphasizes that there is no way to prevent such misinformation from being picked up and reprinted in this country. There is no reason to believe that the CIA has altered the nature of its covert propaganda activities since the Church Committee issued its report.

A supplementary report dealing in detail with the CIA's use of the media was prepared by the Church Committee but never released to the public. This document has been filed with the Senate and is available only to senators. The report is believed to contain a lot of information about the ways the CIA has manipulated the media and public opinion.

Americans have a right to know whether their government is engaged in polluting the foreign and U.S. news media. Kissinger's statement that it is never justified to put out misleading information makes it incumbent on the government to provide assurance that it is not being done. A good place to start in giving Americans the facts is to make public the secret Church Committee report on the CIA's covert propaganda activities.